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ABSTRACT

The assumptions behind open education, when applied to television, suggest that children should create their own television programs based on their interests and experiences and that these programs should be disseminated widely. The availability of videotape systems and the rapid development of community cable television (CATV) makes these ideas possible, providing that the open education classroom teacher can be helped to understand the utility of the technology and to help students become television producers. Unique possibilities offered by video for curriculum building can be seen in enrichment verbal skills and language arts, in social studies, in science and math, in the arts, and in self-understanding and interpersonal communication. The cablecasting of child-produced programs via community CATV should help to produce pride and a sense of efficacy in the children. The costs and equipment needed for a "bare essentials" system are minimal, and the imaginative teacher with active children will be able to work effectively even if limited to Portapak work. (Author/SH)

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VIDEO, TELEVISION AND THE OPEN CLASSROOM

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School and the Contemporary Culture

In the history of education, recognition of the need to consider the child's contemporary culture in planning the artificially-created school environment is a relatively recent phenomenon. John Culkin and Bob Geller of the Center for Understanding Media in New York write, "The first big breakthrough occurred toward the end of the nineteenth century when the high schools finally decided to include the study of vernacular literature within a curriculum which until then almost exclusively dealt with the Latin and Greek classics." (1)

Today, there is no longer any serious doubt that television overwhelmingly influences the life of the elementary school child. The average sixth grader watches over thirty hours per week. He begins attending to television's moving images before he is two; thus, school is more than three years behind its electronic competitor the minute the child first walks in the door, and continues to fall further behind as the years go by. Television, however, need not be a competitor; it is possible to harness its potential for the enrichment of the child's learning and the enhancement of the teacher's instructional repertoire. Few teachers dispute the need to create a school environment that recognizes and builds on the outside environment. When it comes to television, however, equally few translate this need into active classroom practice.

Child-Created Television and Open Education

Open classroom teachers are generally committed to the following assumptions: Children should actively manipulate the tools of learning; they should share in the shaping of their school environment; the school environment should reflect and build upon outside experience; respect for a child's work should be demonstrated by public display; the curriculum extends from the child's individual needs, inclinations, and prior activities. Applied to television, these assumptions clearly indicate that children should create their own television programs based on their interests, other school work, and experiences outside the school. They further suggest that these programs be given the widest possible exposure through whatever channels of dissemination are available. The availability of easy-to-use half-inch videotape systems, and the rapid development of community cable TV (CATV) systems in Canada and the United States make these things possible. What remains is for teachers to catch up with the technology and to devise ways for their children to become television producers.

My colleagues and I at the University of Massachusetts School of Education have conducted several workshops for initiating teachers to the creative potential of child-created television in the elementary school. We have found, somewhat to our surprise, that the strongest resistance often comes from open classroom teachers. Perhaps this should not be surprising. Teachers tell us that video and TV are seen as parts of a larger "educational technology" scheme which, in turn, is viewed as a force lessening the child's active involvement with

the "stuff" of learning and fostering dependency and passivity. Without a doubt, the poorer examples of educational technology serve to justify this position, but is wrong to see "technology" as evil in its own right; rather, one needs to look beyond the negative uses to which it has been put to the positive potentials. It is especially unfortunate that this negative bias should be so strong in open educators whose practices generally demonstrate a relentless pursuit of new means and materials to actively engage kids in the processes of their own learning and the realities of their own culture.

Video, television and CATV are tools, just as pencils, paints and yardsticks are; their appropriateness to the open classroom will depend entirely on how they are used. They offer unique possibilities for information retrieval, organization and reporting; for integrating the school subject areas and a variety of other media; for artistic expression; for the wide public display of children's efforts; and for individual and collaborative work. Furthermore, through its unique capacity for instant replay, it contributes to the development of self-understanding, human relations skills, and visual literacy. For these tools to be used in these ways, however, they need to be viewed unconventionally. TV is no longer simply a box to sit and watch. It is now possible for children to "write" with a medium they have been using so long only to "read."

Video and Curriculum-Building

Open educators tend to be eclectic in their curriculum development practices, selecting materials and activities for the classroom on the basis of immediate circumstances, past history, and the needs of individual children. The goals of curriculum, however, are clear. The environment of the school is rich and varied; learning the skills required to function in a community is more important than learning facts; traditional divisions between subject areas are broken down in favor of project work which encompasses a variety of "subjects;" and evaluation of a child's work is supportive rather than judgemental. In such a learning and teaching environment, video and television can enrich the curriculum in the following ways.

Language Arts: Verbal skills enter into all video productions, not just those specifically aimed at developing them. Productions require scripts and written scenarios. Scripts imply speaking parts in many forms. Interviews, documentaries, plays, and role-playing all feature children talking on-camera either from prepared scripts or spontaneously. Productions can focus directly on the language arts. Stories and plays can be written especially for video production. Newsworthy school and community events can be researched, written up and reported. Pupil-written poetry can be put to visuals created by other kids and televised.

A group of ten year old children working with us at [illegible] completely re-wrote the fairy tale *Rapunzel* into script form, changing

it into a parody of middle-class values. They made hand puppets from old socks for each of the characters, and an elaborate cardboard castle complete with turret was constructed for Repunzel's incarceration. The result was a delightful satire which formed part of an entirely child-produced show that was broadcast on the local CATV channel in Amherst.

At the same time as building skills in the language arts, elements of social studies, fine arts, craft, math (figuring the dimensions of the cardboard castle) and human relations were also present in these activities.

Social Studies: Through video, an almost limitless variety of community-based social studies activities can be developed. Some of these can extend from existing curricular materials, others from the unique experiences and interests of children in their communities, and still others from the local news media. Video offers an unparalleled opportunity to connect the classroom with resources outside the school. For example, the New York Times publishes elementary level units on drugs and race relations. Both of these issues seriously affect most American communities, and for those few children who haven't come into direct contact with them, they have certainly learned of them through the popular media. Interviews can be conducted with people who have used drugs, and such people involved in dealing with the problem as community action workers and teachers. Concrete and useful information affecting the real lives of the children themselves can be researched and reported to the community

in honest and fresh ways not possible for the adult, commercial media.

The portable videotape recorder is especially well suited for activities beyond the school walls. Children drawn from the same group as those who produced the puppet show described above recently visited the local public radio station where other children their own age produce a weekly program called Cat's Cradle.[2] Their goal was to use video to explore the similarities and differences between radio and television production, to establish an exchange between the two groups in order to broaden the experiences of both, and to cablecast a full program on the Cat's Cradle children as one in the series of TV programs produced during the school year. Four children and a U Mass student carted a video portapak, tripod and extension microphone over to the radio station and taped a program according to a scenario they had developed beforehand. First, the kids introduced themselves and stated their purpose for the visit. Then the Cat's Cradle children introduced themselves, and the adult director, Glenda Henery, gave a brief overview of what the program was all about. This was followed by a short videotaping of the radio program in progress and a tour of the control room and conversation with the person in charge. Finally, Glenda and her charges were interviewed to cover questions not answered in the previous taping. The whole procedure went almost exactly according to plan except for one thing. There was a malfunction in the extension microphone, so we ended up with a visually rich product but no

sound. The adult (it was I) was shattered, but the kids took the blow philosophically, and were particularly pleased with their camera work and on-camera (visual) presence when they viewed the playback.

Working in video often presents problems such as the one just described; teachers with a low tolerance for the uncertainties of technology will probably develop frustration levels too high to live with unless they learn to accept the uncertainties as part of the game. There is no doubt that I should have checked the microphone in advance, but there are so many things to check that it is easy to forget one of them, especially when the pressures of time are great. It might even be safer to train the kids to run the equipment checks before going out into the field.

Science and Math: Much of the work on science and math in the open classroom can be put to video in ways that are informative and amusing for other children. Many kids are engaged in hobbies at home which contain elements of math and science. A range of experiments and how-to-do-it projects from making battery-operated door bells to blocking out geometric shapes for quilt-making can be conducted on-camera. "lessons" for peers and younger children can be created with weights, balances, repeating patterns, etc. The Nuffield maths projects are particularly well-suited for this sort of activity. Quantitative information can be conveyed through the construction and display of graphs (also containing elements of art), and video

units on such scientific and mathmatical themes as time, motion, and power can integrate a variety of phenomena.

Here's another concrete example. In an inner-city school in Holyoke, Massachusetts, kids produced for community cablecast a program on their crafts and hobbies, some of which were based on scientific principles. One such child was the school's champion maker of paper airplanes. Previously, his expert activities in this field had resulted in nothing but trouble for him, and it took some persuading to have him "go straight" by demonstrating on video how his better models were made and explaining what, in their design, made them so effective. To do this, he had to find out why they worked so well. Aided by the U Mass staff and his own teacher, he did some research which resulted in an informative verbal discription of aerodynamic principles which told us all a lot that we hadn't known before. Obviously, this child was doing much more than science; he was developing his verbal skills, engaging in research and organization of information, and developing his self-esteem by having a skill previously associated with negative responses highly valued.

Video production itself involves the maths and sciences in ways that have nothing to do with what is produced on-camera. The technical requirements of production involve principles of light and sound, chemistry and physics. Timing must be calculated for each program in the scripting and editing processes, just as aspect ratios for the construction of sets and graphics have to be cal-

culated and measured. The technology of TV production can be explored to whatever degree of complexity is appropriate to the ability and interest of each child.

The Arts: The instant feedback potential of video has strong implications for drama, pantomime, body movement, sport and music.[3] We have seen that graphic work is usually needed for productions of all sorts. This again highlights the integrative quality of video; it acts as a catalyst for bringing a variety of task and media elements together. It gives a purpose and context for the arts, but it can serve equally well to display the arts in their own right. Exhibits of painting, drawing, sculpture, photography and filmmaking can be combined with on-camera reports and interviews with the young artists themselves. A youngster in our project made a 16 millimeter film loop by etching figures on black leader with a push pin frame by frame, and transferred it onto half-inch videotape. (This can be done either by taping directly off a film chain -- if you have one -- or by projecting the film onto a regular screen and videotaping from that). On the same tape, this filmmaker carefully described the process he used while illustrating on a blackboard.

The Self in a Social Environment: Many of the possibilities video offers for self-understanding and interpersonal communication remains to be explored. There can be no doubt, however, that the ability to immediately review one's behavior in a social setting gives the child (or anyone else for that matter) a more realistic

data base for self-assessment than would otherwise be the case. Kids can engage in role-playing exercises designed to explore the complexities of human relations, and how it might feel to be in the shoes of other people. Probably the most appropriate activities for individual situations will be developed by individual teachers according to their needs; on the other hand, outside sources of information might be needed for a start.[4]

In order to survive in a social world, one must be able to communicate effectively. It is becoming increasingly evident that verbal communication comprises only a relatively small part of the total human communications scheme. Although I do not believe that words and print will ever become obsolete, I am keenly aware of the increasingly visual nature of the media bombardment we -- and especially our children -- are undergoing. It is imperative that children learn to communicate visually in a visual environment. Furthermore, as I hope I have made clear, visual communication through video usually aids verbal communication, because the two are usually intertwined. Although there are many fruitful video exercises that are purely visual in nature,[5] most require that the traditional communications skills of information retrieval, organization and transmission be used. Video has the facility to help children develop the verbal and visual skills, not only in isolation, but in dynamic combination with one another.

Cable Television: To Honor Thy Child

Open educators often speak of the need for a child's work to be valued and recognized. Cable TV allows children to display their concerns and artistry to entire local communities. Many CATV systems are capable of directly broadcasting half- or one-inch videotape to every subscribing home and institution.[6] At the present time, the responsibilities of the local CATV operator to the communities in which he operates are unclear. Because licensees are franchised at the town level, the regulations vary from locale to locale, but most CATV systems are under some pressure to grant free access and technical help to community individuals and institutions -- especially schools.

Over the past year, the children with whom we at U Mass have been working have regularly produced monthly programs for cablecast over the local systems in Amherst and Holyoke, Massachusetts. The kids have taken pride in their newly found access to the community channels of communication, and have gone to considerable trouble to make their programs amusing and interesting.

Not all video activity in the classroom, however, should be tied to production for ultimate broadcast. The kids should feel free to "mess around" and experiment in school and out without the fear that everything they do is intended for display to the entire town. Like a poem written to oneself or a close friend, some video work should remain private.

There are still many north American communities without cable television. This should not dissuade interested teachers from using video in the classroom; there are many ways of disseminating kids' video work without CATV. Productions can be broadcast over a local school's closed circuit television system or, if there is none, a playback deck can be carted from room to room. Tapes can be shown at PTA meetings, in other schools, or at special community screenings. They can be exchanged with out-of-town schools by mail. Although cable television is not absolutely required, it helps a great deal, and teachers in communities without it should collectively begin lobbying at the local levels of government for the establishment of responsive CATV systems.[7]

Equipment Guidelines

The first step for the teacher is to find out what video equipment the school system can make available. If there is none at all, it might not be a bad thing. Purchases of video and television equipment in the late 1960s were often so poorly considered that schools ended up with expensive and cumbersome systems equally forbidding to pupils and teachers alike. Teachers finding themselves in schools with this sort of equipment should, nevertheless, learn how to use it, and refuse to accept the argument that only the A-V technician

is qualified to do so. Anyone can learn how to use the typical school TV studio, and kids will learn even faster than their elders.

Teachers in schools without massive television studios should do everything in their power to prevent them from being acquired. For a fraction of the cost, flexible and modular half-inch systems can be purchased that will allow sophisticated studio-type productions to be made anywhere in the building, and to have two single camera portable video systems for use in and outdoors.

This is what is needed: two half-inch video recorders, one with editing capacity (e.g. a Sony AV 3600 and AV 3650);[8] two portable video recorders (Sony AV 3400 Videorover) that can be operated by battery or AC current. Two camera adapters will be required so that the portapak cameras can be used for studio work with the non-portable video recorders. A special effects generator is required for switching, fading, and other camera effects. (A much cheaper camera switcher will suffice if more sophisticated effects are considered too much of a luxury). This system will need three small TV monitors; one for the first camera, one for the second, and the third to show which combination of the two is actually being recorded. Tripods are a must! The cameras are hard for anyone to hold steady under the best of circumstances for more than a few minutes. These tripods should be small enough for short children to use without standing on their tiptoes, but they should be heavy. For less than $10,000. a school can acquire such a system

with money left over for accessories (extra cable, camera shoulder braces, portable tungsten lights, dolly tripods).

In my opinion, the above is a superior and easily useable system at a reasonable cost, but is far greater than the bare essentials. One can get started with a single portapak, a tripod, and a cheap extension microphone, all totalling to less than $2,000. The studio situation has the advantage of allowing kids to interact as members of a production team with highly specific and interconnecting tasks. It also gives them a greater variety of things to do, but the imaginative teacher with active children will never run out of ideas even if limited to portapak work.

And Finally. . .

Technology is neutral. When it fails us, it is a problem of human goals and usage. Patricia Hindley of Simon Fraser University in Vancouver writes, "Technology can afford us the possibilities; it cannot of itself guarantee that we will use it to our best advantage." (2) Only we can guarantee that.

Footnotes

1. In three years of work in a large and fairly representative sample of elementary schools in western Massachusetts, student staff members of the Children's Video Theatre, a U Mass School of Education project, failed to find a single school in which kids were using video in their classrooms. Although most schools were receptive to the U Mass input, in each case the initiative came from the outside. There is evidence that the active use of video by kids in their schools is increasing, but it is still rare.

2. Active child involvement by kids in the processes of mass communication need not be limited to video and television. Radio station WFCR-FM in Amherst, Massachusetts recently opened its airwaves to children on the strength of a convincing proposal submitted by Glenda Henery, presently a U Mass undergraduate. Cat's Cradle broadcasts hour-long programs each week on Saturday evenings at 7:30 p.m.

3. There are three books which I have found particularly helpful in discovering ways to adapt every conceivable variety of improvisational drama for video: Viola Spolin's Improvisation for the Theatre; Theatre in my Head, by Dan Chelfetz; and Gabriel Barnfield's Creative Drama in Schools.

4. A fairly new book, Values Clarification, by Sidney Simon,

Leland Howe and Howard Kirschenbaum is excellent for teachers seeking ways to help children develop strong convictions and social skills, whether or not they are using video. Kit Laybourne has developed related exercises explicitely for video which can be found in the book Doing the Media, available, as far as I know, only from The Center for Understanding Media, 267 West 25th Street, New York 10001. An article on video for five and six year olds, "Instant Replay" by Peter Haratonik in the January-February 1973 issue of K - Eight is very useful for teachers at the earliest grade levels.

5. Quincy Bent, formerly Director of the Video Center at the Children's Museum in Boston and presently a video consultant for schools in the same city, has developed an interesting series of "video vocabulary-building" exercises which he has shared with the kids of Children's Video Theatre. I understand that written descriptions will be available soon. He can be contacted through the Children's Museum.

6. The newer three-quarter inch video cartridge systems can also be directly cablecast.

7. The following organizations will be helpful in this regard: the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), and in Canada the Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC), can make

available current federal regulations and guidelines on cable on written request. To start with, however, talks with governmental authorities at the municipal level will probably be more useful. Important articles are "Voices on the Cable" by Barry Head in the February 1973 issue of Harper's, especially the section on resources and citizen action on pages 33 and 34; "The Wired Nation," a basic, if somewhat dated, primer on cable in America by Ralph Lee Smith in the May 18, 1970 issue of The Nation; and Jim Farrell's "The Great Canadian Cable Rip-Off" in Take One, Volume 2, Number 12. A new booklet prepared by Anne Hanley of the National Cable Television Association (918 16th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006), Cable Television and Education will also be found to be helpful.

8. I mention Sony here only because I am familiar with their equipment. Other manufacturers can supply perfectly adequate hardware. Each brand, including Sony, has idiosyncratic strengths and defects.

References

(1) Kit Laybourne et. al., Doing the Media, New York, New York: The Center for Understanding Media, 1972, Page 9.

(2) M. Patricia Hindley, "The 'Communications Revolution'," University Affairs, Volume 14, Number 4, April 1973, Page 4.